THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK ABOUT GOD
"Can I See God?"
November 7, 1999

John M. Buchanan

Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush alive with God.
Only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit around and pick blackberries.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning
"Aurora Leigh"

FOURTH
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Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

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CAN I SEE GOD?

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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John 1:14-18
Exodus 33: 12-23

"I will put you in a cleft in the rock . . . and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen." (Exodus 33:22,23)

Dear God, sometimes you stop us in our tracks with a gift of beauty, of friendship, of courage, of love, and when it happens we feel awe and gratitude and joy. O God, grant us grace to embrace the experiences of the holy which you give. Startle us with your truth, and open our hearts and minds to your word, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It is not easy to talk about personal religious experiences. In fact, it may not be possible to describe adequately, intensely personal experiences of the holy, the sacred—God, if you will. Sometimes it sounds like bragging, sometimes it sounds like fiction, sometimes it sounds silly. Have you ever tried it, tried to describe to another person why and how you were moved by a particularly glorious sunrise over Lake Michigan, or a symphony, or a motion picture? When it comes to trying to talk about our experiences of God, it never comes out quite right. Besides, religious experiences aren't very Presbyterian. We like our religion "decently and in order," and religious experiences can be a little disorderly and irrational.

In his new book, *How Do You Know When It's God,* author Dan Wakefield tells about a conversation he had with Reynolds Price. Price, distinguished American author, has described his own religious experience during his battle with spinal cancer. A young medical student, Jim Fox, struggling with cancer, wrote to Price, asking "Does God Exist and Does He Care. Price's response to Fox, who subsequently died, is now a small book with that title. In it, Price, the novelist, the consummate literary scholar, says simply, yes and yes. God exists and God cares. But it's not a simplistic answer. Price faces the darkness with eyes wide open; the agonizing silences of God, the universal and intensely personal experiences of God's absence, from Jesus' cry from the cross, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" to his own sense that God turns his back on occasion. But yes, Price believes God exists and God cares and his faith, his trust in God's goodness and grace and mercy is, as it always has been, at the center of his life.

At the heart of Price's faith is an experience—a dream—a vision—that he wrote about and told to Wakefield. He's in the Sea of Galilee and Jesus pours water over his head and says—'your sins are forgiven.' Price asks 'Am I cured?' And Jesus says, 'That too.'

Dan Wakefield then explains that even though he has not had an experience as vivid as Reynolds Price's, he has had what William Butler Yeats called the trembling of the veil—lying in his bed, looking out the window at the soft, silent snow, and a feeling of extraordinary goodness and peace . . . .Walking down the street and sensing a hand holding his own hand and a sure knowledge comes—Jesus. Sitting in a movie and finding tears suddenly welling up in his eyes, tears of joy and gratitude." (p.250-251)

Has it not happened to you?

One of the most famous such incidents occurred in the life of Blaise Pascal. When he died, a piece of paper was discovered, sewn into the lining of his coat. It bore the inscription of a blazing cross and these words in Pascal's own handwriting:

> "In the year of grace, 1654, Monday 23 November—from about half-past ten in the evening till about half an hour after midnight:
>
> FIRE
>
> God of Abraham, God of Issac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the learned . . . Tears of Joy. God—let me not be separated from thee forever." (Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew,* p.46)

But perhaps the oldest and in many ways the most provocative description of a religious experience is in the Bible, the Book of Exodus.

Moses has already had a life-changing religious experience in the wilderness with a burning bush and a voice that calls his name. Moses already knows about the ambiguity and confusion and plain difficulty human beings have with these experiences. When the bush is burning and the voice comes, and Moses asks about the identity of the voice—just who is speaking—who is there—he receives the most enigmatic answer possible, the voice answers, "I AM WHO I AM," about which Bill Cosby once asked, "What kind of name is that?"

Moses has led the people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea with the Egyptian army in hot pursuit, into the arid, lifeless wilderness, and now they are at Mt. Sinai. On the mountain, Moses and the voice—the "I AM"—have more conversations. Moses comes down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments and discovers the people worshipping an idol—an activity forbidden in the very first of those commandments. In a fit of frustrated rage, Moses dashes the tablets of the law on the ground and goes back up the mountain to make a simple and reasonable request—Give me some proof that I'm on the right track here. Help me to know that I'm not imagining all this—that the bush was real, the voice was authentic—this idea of leaving the security of Egypt for the radical freedom of the wilderness, is somehow what you want us to be doing.

"Let me see your glory . . ." Dear God, if it isn't too much to ask, give me something tangible, something to hold on to. After all, here I am, out here in the wilderness, leading a tribe of people into an unknown future with no visible means of survival—I'm feeling a little vulnerable and so if you could just send me a sign that this is what you want, that it's all going to come out right, all of which is encompassed in the deceptively simple request, "Let me see your face."

It reminds me of that wonderful story Peter Gomes told and which I have borrowed at least once before, about the little girl in Sunday School. "She was busily drawing with all her crayons and all her might, when the teacher asked her what she was drawing. 'I am drawing a picture of God,' she said. Her teacher replied, 'But, my dear, nobody knows what God looks like,' to which the little girl replied, without stopping her strokes, 'They will when I am finished.'" (*Sermons, Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p.103)

The best and most provocative part of Moses' experience--which somehow he remembered and passed along, so that in time, generations later, it was written down in the record—is God's answer to his request.

> "There is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen." (Exodus 33:23-24)

Isn't that wonderful? Moses gets to see God—sort of. God remains hidden; God's essence, God's complete identity, God's face. God's own hand covers Moses—prevents Moses from seeing; protects Moses from seeing God; preserves the mystery, the hiddeness of God. Why? Why is the Bible so insistent that seeing God is not a good idea, in fact can be bad for your health? In the Bible, to see God is to die. What's that all about when one of our most elemental desires, apparently, is to see God, to have some proof, some sign that this is authentic?

The scholarly answer sounds like this:

> "The distance between God and human beings is structured into the created order for the purpose of preserving human freedom. For God to be fully present would be coercive . . .faith would be turned into sight, and humankind could not but believe. God's presence cannot be observed: there must be an element of ambiguity, such that disbelief remains possible. A sense of mystery must be preserved." (*Interpretation, Exodus,* Terence E. Fretheim, p.301)

That's why, by the way, the tradition is so opposed to idols. "You shall have no other Gods before me," no idols, no graven images, no likeness, no golden calves, no huge statues even when you know the idol is simply an idol, a representation, a symbol—not for God, because as soon as you represent God too definitely, you limit God; define God too precisely, and pretty soon, you are in control—not God. That is why the Bible is so uncomfortable with artistic attempts to describe God—or scientific attempts, or intellectual attempts, or theological attempts, for that matter. Rather, the Bible describes God in terms of relationships; tells stories about God loving, judging, caring for, protecting, leading, guiding, redeeming, inspiring, saving human beings. But that's never been quite enough for us. We need to objectify God.

So Michaelangelo paints God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel—huge, male, muscular, classically Greco-Roman. And the Presbyterians who wrote the 17th century Westminster Confession of Faith did the same thing, only instead of shapes and color, they use the

biggest, most eloquent words they can think of—"invisible, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible . . ."

Kathleen Norris, in her wonderful book, *Amazing Grace*, talks about the necessity of ambiguity for faith. The Protestantism of her youth, she says, had "all the mystery scrubbed out of it by a vigorous and slightly vinegary reason." (p.116) Norris reminds us that when we ask "what do you believe?" we mean "what do you think?" but the real meaning of I believe—credo—is "I give my heart to." Faith is not believing ideas to be true, but trusting a person, giving your heart.

She writes:

> "Perhaps my most important breakthrough with regard to belief came when I learned to be as consciously skeptical and questioning of my disbelief and my doubts as I was of my burgeoning faith." (p.67)

When religion itself claims to know too much, it forgets a basic Biblical assumption about us and about God—namely that God is God and we are not. Reinhold Niebuhr once quipped that there is "more religious confusion generated by those who claim to know too much about the mystery of life than those who claim to know too little—the ones who know the geography of heaven and hell; the furniture of one and the temperature of the other." (*The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, Mystery and Meaning*, Edited by Robert McAfee Brown)

We observed Reformation Sunday last week on the very day that representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation met in Augsburg, Germany, and signed an agreement which, among other things, affirmed that both churches now agree on basic theology about God's love and grace and how human beings have access to God's salvation, and also lifted all of the condemnations and nasty things the two churches have said about each other for 450 years. And some of them were pretty nasty. Luther said some awful things about the Papacy and the Papacy excommunicated Luther, burned his writings, and condemned him as a heretic. At heart, in fact, neither side was willing to acknowledge that the other side was authentically Christian. Each side of the Protestant-Catholic divide in Christianity was confident that it had the truth and the other side did not. That's what I was taught; it's what my Catholic friends were taught about us. Too bad—your church isn't a real church. Your faith isn't the real thing. We were sure of it. And in the name of that confidence, history has been stained with tragedy—large and small—wars, prejudice, hatred, including the continuing specter of violence in Northern Ireland, where both communities continue to eye one another with hostility and suspicion, invoking deeds done and violence perpetrated hundreds of years ago.

Thanks be to God that we are a little less sure that we have the whole truth and the other side does not.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, says that the trouble with modern Christianity is that it thinks it knows too much. He calls it the "Triumph of Certitude," and observes that if we claim to know God, we limit God and ultimately control God. That's why Moses

doesn't get to see God's face. St. Augustine put it simply: "If you think you understand, it isn't God."

God doesn't give Moses a good look at the whole truth, for Moses' own sake. The Bible itself, it seems, exhibits a profound modesty about God. The other way of saying that is that there is something essential about our humanity, our creatureliness, that acknowledges the mystery, that is open to the transcendent, the other.

It's why we are drawn to the everyday beauty of a sunrise or the magnificence of a sunset—because they remind us of reality larger than our own, of a world that was here before we were born and will be here after we are gone; a reminder that the sun has been rising and gorgeously setting for millions of years—that millions of people before us looked up in wonder, as we do.

If you have loved deeply and passionately, you know about a mystery that does not easily reduce to explainable and understandable intellectual categories. You also know that in love there always remains a delectable and delightful mystery about the other. The best of love discovers uniqueness—you are unlike anyone else—unpredictability and surprise are part of the mystery of love.

And if you have witnessed the appearance of new life, a birth, or the end of life; if you have been privileged to stand beside the bedside of a dear one as breathing stops and life ends, you know about mystery and the limits of our ability to understand.

The world is full of God. Nature sings God's praises—reminds us daily of a reality beyond our ability to understand it. Did you get out to see it this autumn, the annual reminder in the glorious colors of dying leaves, of time and eternity and a creator who blesses us with extravagant beauty?

Author Doris Betts, a Presbyterian, by the way, says that "faith is not certainty—faith is the decision to keep your eyes open." (See Norris, p.169)

Which sounds a lot like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's observation several generations ago.

> "Earth's crammed with heaven
> And every common bush alive with God,
> Only he who sees takes off his shoes;
> The rest sit around and pick blackberries."
> *Aurora Leigh*

Can I see God? The answer is 'no.' God is not seeable, understandable. God, to be God, is more than we, transcendent, mysterious. And we, to be who we are, are not God: transient, finite, limited.

But yes. Yes, in a way, in a delightful way, God has arranged for us to see a bit, the back of God, to use the oldest metaphor of all. That's what beauty is for: music, and art and bright red maple leaves and new babies and the face of your beloved and the touch of a

caring hand; that's what humanity at its most human, its most creative and courageous and beautiful and passionate is for.

Can I see God? It is the essence of Christian faith that what we need to know about God in order to make us fully human, is available in the person of Jesus Christ. We make that claim, when we are at our best in profound modesty; not over against other truth claims, but in gratitude for God's gift of love given to us.

Can I see God? No, but I can see and know and trust and follow—which, after all, is what faith really is—the one God has sent, the one about whom someone wrote nearly 2,000 years ago:

> "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." (John 1:18)

His minister said that the last words Walter Payton heard before he died were: "We walk by faith, not by sight."

That, finally, is what this religion of ours is about. It is not a graduate course in theology, getting all of our ideas and propositions and concepts of God right. "We walk by faith, not by sight . . ." It's about trust. It's about following. It's about believing in—giving our heart to—the God who created us and loves us and came to save us, in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

All praise to him. Amen.

Amen.